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Portuguese entrepreneurial women – fostering learning communities

DONA EMPRESA is a project which the Portuguese Association of Women Entrepreneurs APME has been promoting for four years now. The project aims at supporting unemployed women having a business idea, to create enterprises and maintain their own employment. So far about one hundred enterprises have been created in the scope of this project, their surviving rate being very high after one year of business running.

As far as women entrepreneurship is concerned, statistics show that Portugal has a rate of employers and self-employed females higher than any other European country (Eurostat, 2002, 84). Besides, in the early 1980s Portuguese women entrepreneurs started to create professional associations for lobbying, giving visibility to their members and for mutual help in the business world. APME is one of those associations.

As a researcher in Education and Development, I have been interested in work-based learning processes and in entrepreneurship. As a representative of AMONET (the Portuguese Association of Women in Science) at the Commission for Equality and Women Rights (CIDM), where the Portuguese Association of Women Entrepreneurs APME is also represented, common meetings became a challenge to begin an informal partnership that allowed the starting of a study on women entrepreneurs, in Portugal. The analysis of documentation about DONA EMPRESA project and a deeper understanding of APME suggest that this association can be viewed as a professional learning community that fosters entrepreneurial knowledge, competences and skills.

The paper presents a conceptual framework that leads to a definition of professional learning community and then describes the background of the project and its development. After discussing some gender issues that might negatively influence collective and individual learning, the main features in the project that foster learning are specified. In the conclusion, some points to be clarified and questions to be answered by further research are indicated.

Learning Communities and Lifelong Learning

Learning communities and *lifelong learning* are two interconnected concepts, within an overall perspective of learning. There is now a consensus about the idea that individuals learn in their everyday activities, in everything they do, and that learning cannot be separated from action, because learning is situated. Besides, learning is socially constructed, within a context and culture, in social interactions. (Wenger 1998; Lave &

Wenger 1991; von Krogh 1998; Nishiguchi 2001; Nonaka & Nishiguchi 2001), hence all communities learn. Especially when they share the same goals, their members engage in activities to attain these goals and they can seek and give information and knowledge.

The notion of *learning communities* owes much to the notion of *communities of practice* and to Peter Senge's *systems thinking*. Both of these notions emerge in a global ever changing context of uncertainty and complexity, where individuals, groups and organisations can no longer be treated as separated identities, but rather as parts of a whole system which interact in order to adapt to changing environmental conditions. In this process of adapting, as complex adaptive systems, they learn. Learning emerges through the relationships between systems. As a system adapts to its environment, it also influences that same environment. Under this point of view, every *learning community* relates to other communities surrounding it, in the same way as its constituents interact with each other.

Etienne Wenger has been, with other researchers (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger & Snyder 2000) a pioneer in the study of *communities of practice*. In his book *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning and Identity* (1998), he presents a social theory of learning. Underlying the idea of *communities of practice* is the vision of collective knowledge which opposes the vision of knowledge as an individual propriety. A *community of practice* can thus be defined as "a group across which such know-how and sense making are shared – the group which needs to work together for its dispositional know-how to be put into practice" (Brown & Duguid 1998, 96). They are "groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion and for a joint enterprise" (Wenger & Snyder 2000, 139). According to this model, learning is fundamentally experiential and social.

Peter Senge (1990) conceives organisations as open systems which face pressures from their environment to which they must adapt. To the linear cause-effect thinking, common in the analysis of organisational behaviour, Senge poses systems thinking, a way of thinking which understands that any change in one part of the organisation will affect all other parts. Senge focuses on teams as the linkage between individuals and the organisation. A team is "a group of people who functioned together in an extraordinary way – who trusted one another, who completed each others' strengths and compensated for each others' limitations, who had common goals that were larger than individual goals, and who produced extraordinary results" (1990, 4). Senge has developed a learning model that intends to be an adequate strategy for all types of organisations, and that has influenced education and public administration as well. Senge helped to launch SOL – Society for Organizational Learning – linking organisations, researchers, consultants and practitioners all over Europe. This new paradigm was labelled learning communities.

Following Senge's paradigm, in Europe, along with international organisations such as UNESCO and OECD, learning communities are normally defined in terms of geographic location or communities of interest (real or virtual). Almost without exception, the American literature defines learning communities in terms of institutional, or classroom learning environments (Faris & Peterson 2000). In this article, the European definition is followed. The European definition applies to the specific case studied in this paper.

Lifelong learning to cope with changes

ICT revolution, as the main factor of the present globalisation, has transformed our world into a global village and a global market. The world of economy and finance brought about an urge for a competition based on intangible assets. People and their capacity to constantly acquire new knowledge and forget old and

unnecessary have become the most important wealth of organisations (Crozier 1995; Drucker & Nakauchi 1999; Shukla 1997), with the business world funding investigation on the way people learn. Research coming from Palo Alto and other centres gives rise to a vast literature on knowledge management.

At the social level, many transformations emerged in the so-called developed countries. One example is family life, now showing a greater diversity of patterns, including the growth of single parent families and single person households. Families are generally smaller, roles and relationships are also being modified. As far as women are concerned, there is a shift in their experiences and expectations, mainly caused by increased life expectancy and longer periods of retirement from paid employment. Lifelong learning is viewed as a way to face such changes. At the same time, concerns arise about meeting the needs of under-represented groups and how to motivate them for lifelong learning (Fryer 1997).

In a context shaped by a growing power of the economic sector, and national governments confined to a regulating function, enterprises are now the main source of employment, while states employ fewer and fewer people. Individuals are urged to become responsible for their process of lifelong learning, for managing their careers and, if necessary, for creating their own employment. Communities consist of people, so they are expected to become learning communities “in which formal and non-formal life long learning opportunities for individuals and groups enable sustainable economic development, promote social inclusion and cohesion, and foster full civic and social participation. Community development based on a learning community approach fosters the acquisition of information, knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that together build a community’s capacity to successful respond to, and direct economic and social change” (Faris & Peterson 2000, 8).

Although changes affect almost all aspects of individual lives and society in general, lifelong learning has been present in political discourses over the past decade mainly as a way to respond to market changes and to the need of constant retraining and upgrading of skills and competences required by our knowledge economy. The dominance of economic rationales in shaping the concept of lifelong learning has been criticized and it is argued that policy texts during the 1990s have been informed by a conservative version of human capital theory (Leathwood & Francis 2006).

Fostering Women Learning Communities – a case study

In the above context, also marked by growing unemployment affecting female population more than males, development of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills and competences is encouraged, both by national governments and by international institutions. In Portugal, APME, the Portuguese Association of Women Entrepreneurs, was created as a non-governmental organisation in 1985 in Lisbon. It is the first association of women entrepreneurs in our country. In order to consolidate a decentralisation process, other centres have been created in several parts of the country, especially in some regions that have been losing population who emigrate mainly to the coastal regions.

The primary task of APME is to give visibility to Portuguese women entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial women as leaders and managers, both in our country and abroad. In this sense, it has already contributed to gender-based analytical and statistical collection of data by the Ministry of Economy and Employment and other Portuguese institutions. The association has also been promoting information, training, and consulting activities as well as support to entrepreneurial women and to women entrepreneurs.

APME's training relies mostly on teamwork. Trainers use innovative methodologies in training/ consulting activities, aimed at allowing the members to acquire knowledge and experience. They focus on SMEs, thus responding to the members' needs and expectations. As they promote entrepreneurship, enterprises and Portuguese women entrepreneurs, they reinforce these women's role at economic, political, structural and social levels. They develop strategies for agreements of cooperation and work with institutions which are directly or indirectly related to the problematic associated with female entrepreneurship and female entrepreneurs, and to women in general. In so doing, they support creation of employment, wealth and its distribution, by contributing to social and economic stability and to the sustained Portuguese development.

Their task is to lobby, at national and international level, for women entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial women; to publicize their activities, fostering interchange and consolidating their position in the market. They seek to promote cooperation and community building by stimulating the creation of networks, setting conditions for innovation, internationalisation and competitiveness, by supporting co-entrepreneurship and by developing partnerships with similar associations and others. They also promote continuing education and by promoting their professionalism and reinforcing their competitiveness, support the consolidation and development of SMEs. They promote and support the creation of new enterprises, new women entrepreneurs and employment, and contribute to economic and political empowerment of women.

The APME members are women entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial women, at national level, in all fields of activity, independently of the dimension of their business and mode of organisation. The association organises training activities, coaching and consulting for micro businesses and SMEs, seminars, workshops, congresses and debate-dinners. Furthermore, they organise or participate in national and international fairs and exhibitions, promote entertainment and cultural activities to foster knowledge creation, cooperation and team spirit among their fellow members. They also support the launching of their members' products and services and publicise their enterprises and businesses as well. APME is the promoter of the project described in the next section.

In this paper, APME is considered a professional learning community. Supported by the above conceptual framework, a professional learning community is here defined as a group of people formally and informally bound by a professional interest, sharing a vision and purpose, thus fostering risk taking and experimentation. They create a sense of commonality, acknowledge diversity, and share know-how and sense making, continuously improving their knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to cope with the present ever changing environment.

APME's project DONA EMPRESA will be now presented as a successful way of developing entrepreneurship among Portuguese unemployed women.

DONA EMPRESA project

Portugal has seen a significant change in the level of qualifications of the population especially concerning higher education. Taking into consideration the employed population, the number of females who have a higher education degree surpasses the men (Silva 2006). In 1991, women represented no more than 47 percent of the graduates, while in 2001 they reached 55 percent and there is a trend for a continuous rise in the percentage of graduate women. In 2002/ 2003, the feminisation rate of school population was 53 percent in the secondary and 56.6 percent in higher education (data from the Institute of National Statistics – INS). Since higher education is a key factor of progress, and a higher percentage of women presently own higher

academic degrees compared to men, a more participative role for women at economic, social and political levels should be expected. However, this is not reflected in equality of employment opportunities (Silva 2006). Inequalities are still found at all social levels, especially in what concerns employment structure, career development and family responsibilities (Gonçalves 2006).

A study on SME entrepreneurs' wives in Portugal (Guerreiro 1998) showed that although many women were involved in their husband's business life, only 39.5 percent declared to have a regular activity in the family's enterprise and about 44.2 percent owned part of the capital. Most of those who had no functions in the enterprise demonstrated a very traditional conception of the family, and preferred to stay at home taking care of their husband and children. Others played the "wife" role, in a perspective of public relations – participating in social meetings where their emblematic presence supported the value of the enterprise.

Among those who worked in the enterprises, some were normal employees, taking their husbands' orders or the orders of a man in a higher hierarchical level. Some showed their resentment for being excluded from decision making and direct participation. Some said they would like to have a business of their own. A vast number of the women in this study divided their time between domestic activities and the tasks they were in charge of in the enterprise. In general, either alone or with family support, they were fully responsible for all the housework. At the same time, they socialized their children to follow this traditional family model: daughters could perform domestic tasks, and the boys were, in general, socialized to perform professional roles in the future, without participating in domestic chores, just like their fathers (Guerreiro 1998).

Another study which analysed gender equality in Portugal concerning employment structure in 2002 (CIDM, 2003) showed that women are well below men as entrepreneurs mainly in what concerns larger enterprises, with more employing capacity. As for daily working hours, when men and women were asked about the reasons to work less than thirty hours a week, 25 percent of women referred to "housework, taking care of children and others", while 0 percent of men presented the same reason. Inequality was reflected in another parameter as well. Of women 22.7 percent, compared to 13.8 percent of men were "unable to find full-time job". So most women worked part-time due to reasons which were not related to the individual, contrary to men: 47.7 percent of women worked less than 30 hours because of "housework, children or caring for others" or because they were "unable to find a full-time job". As for men, 43.1 percent worked part-time for individual reasons "disease or personal incapacity" or because they did not "want to work more hours".

On the other hand, following the INS data relating to 2002, first job seeking affects women more than men, showing a greater difficulty for young women compared to young men to enter the work market. These problems are not exclusive of Portugal. The European Commission recently organised a conference to overcome barriers to women entrepreneurship. One of the aims was to find ways to facilitate female entrepreneurs' access to finance (European Commission, 2004 and 2006) and e.g. women entrepreneurs' better visibility and better networking were recommended (European Commission, 2006). A survey in 2000 for the Commission suggested that women entrepreneurs face discrimination (whether intentional or unintentional) on the part of finance providers. Since one of the biggest problems women face when they start a business is lack of self-confidence, measures like mentoring and showing role models appear the most effective, as well as networking for women entrepreneurs. Women tend to be more isolated than men,

they are not used to participating in business clubs, such as chambers of commerce, and so they miss out on opportunities to meet potential clients or partners (European Commission, 2004, 12).

As for Portuguese entrepreneurs, male entrepreneurship prevails at national level, they represent 64 percent of new entrepreneurs. However, more and more women are entering the entrepreneurial world – they constitute 40 percent of the entrepreneurs aged 26 to 35, while they are no more than 15 percent of the entrepreneurs over 35 (IAPMEI, 2006). On the other hand, and also because they are young, women entrepreneurs tend to have a higher average level of qualifications than the new men entrepreneurs. Only 1/3 of males have a higher education degree, compared to nearly half of females who have a first, second, or even third (doctorate) level of higher education degree (idem).

Males and females differ in their motivation in creating their own business. According to IAPMEI (2006), males' main motivation was the possibility to be creative/ innovative (48.1 percent) or the possibility of seizing an opportunity (45.3 percent), but females mention the possibility to assure a sustainable economic situation (51 percent) and the possibility to become independent (48.8 percent). It is also interesting to note that the desire to face challenges/ risk taking is comparatively more motivating to men than to women.

The main goals

In this context, with an aim of developing entrepreneurship among Portuguese women, APME has since 2002 been working on DONA EMPRESA project, which is co-financed by the European Union. The project aims at developing entrepreneurial capabilities, enhancing creation of new enterprises and job opportunities, and providing tools to potential entrepreneurs.

The target group are the unemployed women, aged 18 and up, who have a project or a business idea, available time and who are registered in the Centre of Employment of their area. As far as educational qualifications are concerned, in the first year of the project, compulsory education was required. In 2004, POEFDS (Operational Program Employment Training and Social Development) changed requirements to a higher education degree. Was it an attempt to respond to the rising unemployment among higher education graduates? The APME association hopes that this requirement for a higher education degree will change.

On the one hand, graduate females have not proved to be better fitted to business, on the other hand they prefer to get a job and seem to be less prepared to risk-taking. In fact, while in the first stage of the project, where candidates had average medium qualifications, only one quit after the training phase, for health reasons, 40 percent of the candidates to the following stages have quit after the training phase. Also the European Commission has recognized that "female graduates are much less likely to start a business than women with lower qualifications" (E.C., 2004, 14). And, in Portugal, women with higher education degrees tend to leave the inland and go to coastal regions in search of jobs and to build their future.

In order to promote decentralisation, Lisbon and Vale do Tejo region have not been included in the project. Three regions were considered: the North, the Centre and the Alentejo.

The plan of the project included 314 hours of professional training in class, 100 hours of consulting to support the design of the business plan and the start-up and consolidation of the new-born businesses – 80 hours before the actual start and 40 hours afterwards, in order to make the necessary adjustments. It also included funding support to the starting up, as well as building up of an interactive network between the new projects.

The added value of the project resides in enhancing women entrepreneurship and new enterprises through the immersion, from the beginning, within entrepreneurial spirit and environment, by offering training which focuses on behavioural and technical/ technological areas which are needed to the creation, management and leadership of micro-enterprises. Training is complemented by a coaching process in order to support both the business plan design and launching the enterprise or self-employment along the first months of life. It also strengthens the economic and social structure of the different regions in the country, by creating employment and by distributing wealth. Through training in management and leadership, potential women entrepreneurs develop competences, attitudes and behaviours needed in business life.

Some results – discussion

By the end of 2006, about one hundred enterprises, located in the North, Centre and the Alentejo regions, were created and supported in the scope of DONA EMPRESA project. Training has been secured by two consultants, both APME members – one that covers the North and another one that covers the Alentejo and the Centre. APME keeps following and giving technical support to these women entrepreneurs when they are already in the market. Results presented here concentrate on the first edition of the project, which is now entering its third edition.

By 2005, 41 new enterprises have been created and are being led by women – 10 in the North; 10 in the Alentejo and 21 in the Centre. The disparity between the Centre region and the Alentejo might be explained by the fact that the Centre is much more populated than the Alentejo, while the latter region has been suffering from a continuous depopulation process, it is far more difficult to understand the disparity between the Centre and the North. Further research is needed to understand this situation.

As for the types of business created, they generally fall into the traditional areas of women's work: services to the community – nurseries, services to elderly people, study rooms, hair-dresser, decoration, cafés, handicraft, and the like. However, in the Centre region, among the total of 21 enterprises, five stand out as different: one in the area of informatics – PC tools; one in project engineering, security coordination and construction leadership and three in consulting – accounting; human resource management, finance project surveying.

Taking into account the context in which this project has been launched, its results are quite successful. Learning obstacles as well as learning triggers will be discussed in the following section.

Learning obstacles in DONA EMPRESA

Due to cultural patterns, and because during the training period expenses related to care for children and elderly were paid for, it can be expected that at least some women in the project still experience difficulty in balancing family duties and their professional activities.

Traditional patterns emerge from the types of business chosen by these women entrepreneurs – they are mainly in the area of services to community which are traditionally roles played by females. Five in 41 make the difference, in fields traditionally chosen by males.

Generally speaking, Portuguese entrepreneurs, especially from small enterprises, do not use ICT for business purposes. As a rule, women are more conservative than men, which makes on-line training practically impossible. Besides, women entrepreneurs in this project very seldom use the existing virtual network to exchange ideas with their fellows – the Association site forum is rarely visited.

Learning triggers

In the training period, innovating methodologies, adapted to women idiosyncrasies, have been used. While mentoring have helped to a kind of individualising care, demanded by the diversity of the trainees, interaction and mutual help have been encouraged.

Decentralisation of the training process made the training team to move instead of the trainees, thus enabling women belonging to the same geographic community to have training together. Moreover, and even if the care of children and elderly women were paid by the project during the training period, not having to travel a long way for training probably help these women to better balance their domestic life with their training activities.

There are two consulting periods where coaching is provided – one immediately after the training period, to help build the business plan, and another one after the business has been set up. This coaching helps to develop self-esteem and self-confidence necessary to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to face the future.

The fact that, in order to get financed, there is an obligation to keep the enterprise for at least two years, can give motivation for carrying on learning.

Conclusion

First findings about the results of this project suggest that its success reside mainly in four main factors: creating a safe learning environment during the training period; solving funding problems, the developing the self esteem and self confidence of the new women entrepreneurs, and the commitment to go on with the new business for a certain period of time.

First, mentoring and methodologies enhancing interaction between the trainees during the training period foster the flow of tacit knowledge and the creation of the necessary new knowledge, skills and attitudes required to start a business, in a supportive learning environment.

Secondly, to solve funding problems, APME has established a partnership with a local bank to finance the projects, when necessary, thus avoiding segregation women meet when they try to get funds.

Thirdly, coaching provided by consultancy, not only at the time of business plan design but also after the training period, following the business evolution, other than promoting self esteem and self confidence, can enhance autonomy and a sense of personal achievement.

As a matter of fact, due to rapid and unexpected market changes, it has to be taken into consideration that a business which is a source of profit at a given time, can stop being profitable in a few months, requiring a redirecting of the enterprise goals. The fact that the owner can count on experienced coaching reduces anxiety and fear for the future. Last but not the least, the exigencies to maintain the business running for a given period can stimulate a commitment to build a sustainable business and may develop a desire for challenge and risk taking.

Findings also suggest a need to find ways to stimulate these new women entrepreneurs to use the network and to rely more on ICT. Moreover, the majority of these women start their business in fields that women traditionally are expected to know about, such as retail, fashion, food or children and care for the elderly. There seems to be a need to attract more females to other fields where men traditionally excel, like technology equipment, construction and others. Maybe the five above-mentioned cases, in these last areas, can be divulged in case they prove successful, thus probably motivating newcomers.

Some disparities between regions need deeper understanding, and further research, following approaches that try to size reality in its complexity. Two other questions need to be answered: how did these women manage to balance family life and business activity? What are their main motivations to create their own business?

Another factor accounts for the success of the project: a number of unemployed women is now employed and autonomous. The project has entered its third stage in 2006, and it is expected that lessons learned with the previous ones allow necessary improvements.

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